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Bo Gritz—Patriot's quest for MIAs or an impossible dream?

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NAKHON PHANOM, Thailand—From his cell in the police station here last week, Bo Gritz stared out about 100 yards to see a slow moving river he calls "the creek," and to contemplate its shadowy far shoreline, which is Communist Laos.

The river is the Mekong, the meandering stream that cuts through parts of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, and thus a river that once flowed importantly through Gritz's life. It is important to him once again.

A 44-year-old former Green Beret lieutenant colonel and one of the most decorated heroes of the Vietnam war, James "Bo" Gritz has been arguing for years that perhaps 200 American military men are still being held prisoner in Indochina. He now claims that he has evidence of the existence of at least 10 of the men after leading a small squad of former soldiers on three clandestine missions into Laos over the last six months.

His search for the missing soldiers apparently ended last week when he and four members of his group were jailed in Thailand. They were charged with illegal possession of powerful sophisticated radio equipment found in a house they have used as an operational base in Nakhon Phanom.

AS ASTOUNDING AS Gritz's bizarre undertaking, code named "Operation Lazarus," sounds, Gritz himself is perhaps no less astounding. He is a sort of throwback to the old frontiersman as portrayed by John Wayne, a man Gritz admits admiring very much.

Before he was released on bail last Friday, pending a trial scheduled later this month, Gritz clearly awed his Thai jailers. Though he left the army nearly a decade ago, he is still every inch a military man in his bearing, which is formidable with his muscular, six-foot frame.

In the morning and early evening he stood at respectful, soldierly attention while the Thai police held their flag raising and lowering ceremonies. During the day he entertained his jailers with demonstra-

tions of skip rope jumping and tae kwon-do, the Korean martial arts form for which he holds a sixth degree black belt.

When he wasn't entertaining his jailers, he was charming sympathetic admirers who were calling him from the United States, not to mention a dozen or so American journalists gathered at the jail.

"We've been successful three times in crossing the creek," Gritz said, speaking of his trips across the Mekong at night into Laos. "We spent four months out of the last six months in the workshop area [operating near suspected Laotian prisoner camps]."

"The U.S. government is opposed to and does not support these types of activities," said Lt. Col. Paul Mather last week, speaking of Gritz's forays into Laos. "We find them unhelpful to our interests."

Mather had just interviewed Gritz about his alleged new evidence showing the existence of living American prisoners in Laos. As the head of the Joint Casualty Resolution Centers office in the American Embassy in Bangkok, Mather is charged with tracking down any reports of the existence of, or the remains of, the 2,500 Americans still unaccounted for from the Vietnam war.

Mather refused to talk to reporters about his discussions with Gritz, but the Associated Press on Thursday cited anonymous Pentagon sources in Washington who claimed Gritz had no evidence at all to give to Mather. Officials in Washington are reportedly furious about Gritz's unauthorized travels into Laos because they endanger ongoing negotiations to get an accounting of the Americans missing in action from the Indochinese Communist governments.

FOR HIS PART, Gritz seems to have little patience for the desk-bound bureaucrats who condemn him.

"They have their forms, and they have to be careful that all their forms are filled out, and to stay as deep in the shadows as they can," he said. "They wait for things to happen, while I'm making things happen."

In a written outline that Gritz prepared for Operation Lazarus last November, he explained how useless he felt Washington bureaucrats could be.

"I intend to do everything I can to cooperate and coordinate this effort with executive desires. It just needs to be finished and if I and my people don't do it, I don't know anyone in Washington who will. It takes action, and both Teddy Roosevelt and John Wayne are dead."

All last week, Gritz insisted that he had, indeed, brought out evidence from his last trip into Laos in February. But, he said, the evidence is in the form of undeveloped photographs taken by Laos freedom fighters of Americans living in detention and he said he was reluctant to comment on the photos until they are processed and he can examine them.

PERHAPS THE MOST serious criticism being leveled at him, however, is that he has been collecting money from the families of soldiers listed as missing in action in order to finance his search missions. These critics claim that Gritz's belief that at least 200 MIAs still survive is totally unfounded and that Gritz is using the money he solicits to live out his personal fantasies of being the perennial soldier.

When he first began planning his rescue mission four years ago, several members of the National League of Families, the organization made up of relatives of the MIAs,

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gave Gritz money, including \$25,000 from George Brooks, the league's president. Since then, the league's enthusiasm for Gritz has apparently cooled somewhat.

"We think these efforts are a bad idea," said Carol Bates, the league's director of public affairs. "He [Gritz] told us he was doing this at the direction of the U.S. government, but we know that wasn't true."

Judie Taber, a member of the league's Southern California chapter, said Gritz and his wife, Claudia, have solicited MIA families directly for money, either by telephone or at chapter meetings. At a meeting last August with 15 families, she said Gritz outlined his latest forays to them and said that if the families didn't support the secret rescue mission, they "really didn't care about the POWs."

THOSE CHARGES have stung Gritz deeply.

"I don't go around soliciting money at all," he said last week. The only money he ever received from MIA families, he said, was from George Brooks.

He said he raised the money to finance his undertakings through public speaking and unsolicited donations. Two of his more celebrated sources of money have been famous actors. William Shatner gave him \$10,000 for Gritz's life story for a future film script, portraying some of his past heroics such as retrieving a captured U-2 spy plane, capturing enemy generals, and blowing up bridges far behind enemy lines. Clint Eastwood gave him a reported \$30,000 to undertake Operation Lazarus.

MOREOVER, Gritz insists that his clandestine operations in Laos were

carried out with the cooperation, knowledge and approval from the highest levels of American government. He said he was asked to plan the operation four years ago by a high ranking general in the Defense Intelligence Agency.

"I'm not going to do anything to betray or embarrass my country or my President. I have always and only wanted to be a soldier. I don't care what the critics say. They're not in the arena." Gritz said he was selected to organize and head up a private, unofficial rescue mission because he is an acknowledged expert in covert, behind-the-lines operations.

IN FACT, he said, he has received a great deal of assistance and guidance from various government agencies whose officials are convinced, according to Gritz, that American prisoners remain in Indochina.

Whatever controversy surrounds Gritz right now, he has to put it aside while he deals with more pressing realities. The charge he faces in Thailand carries with it a maximum five-year sentence, and, even if the Thais should release him to go home, he says he has been told that the Federal Bureau of Investigation has drawn up 18 charges against him and may arrest him when he arrives in California. That prospect, he said, depresses him the most.

"I feel like I am now a man without a country," Gritz said. "There's not a damn person in the world to stand up for you when you're down."

"Maybe I should just go across the creek. At least there I can be an eagle."